

# TOPOFF

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

By Sherry L. Baranek, Senior Editor

## **A recent simulated terrorism response exercise allowed emergency personnel to carry out worst-case scenarios and fine-tune operations for unexpected future events.**

**I**N MAY, A FIVE-DAY TERRORISM RESPONSE exercise was conducted to provide training for federal, state and local responders as well as top officials on how to implement a coordinated national response to weapons of mass destruction (WMD) attacks. Sponsored by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the simulated drill also gave a number of service organizations the opportunity to participate—resulting in a new awareness about the importance of combining com-

munications and technology to better prepare for anything the future may hold.

TOP OFFICIALS 2 (TOPOFF 2) participants included top officials from more than twenty federal agencies and the American Red Cross as well as medical personnel, firefighters and law enforcement officials from Illinois, Washington, Canada and Washington, DC. This five-day demonstration was designed to gauge how well the nation would respond to such an event—testing

emergency plans, communications, recovery efforts, etc.

According to U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security Tom Ridge, exercises such as these are an integral part of the nation's national preparedness strategy. "If we are going to make our response system stronger, we first have to identify where strengths and weaknesses exist," he states. "That is what TOPOFF is designed to do. These challenging scenarios forced us to gauge our readiness, test our internal communications and reinforce relationships."

The exercise consisted of simulated attacks in both the Chicago and Seattle metropolitan areas—with Washington State, King County and the City of Seattle responding to a hypothetical explosion containing radioactive material and Illinois State and Cook, Lake, DuPage and Kane Counties as well as the City of Chicago responding to a covert release of a biological agent. Additionally, the National Capital Region—including the District of Columbia, Maryland State and the Commonwealth of Virginia—participated on the mock drill's first day, as well as the Government of Canada, including the Province of British Columbia and the City of Vancouver.

### **Preparing for Disaster**

According to Don Jacks, public affairs officer for the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the drill has been in the works for several years. "There were hundreds of people involved in the organization of the exercise from Washington, Seattle and Chicago," Jacks emphasizes. "It was a lot of hard work. I started attending planning meetings last August."

Although the cost of executing the drill tops sixteen million, Jacks emphasizes that it was worth every penny. "From what I can see, the fact that the DHS undertook this exercise is an example of what we as Americans need to do to prepare. From what I could see, the response and cooperation among the federal agencies, state agencies and local governments was incredible. Although people from Washington, DC were

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involved, it was for the most part a local exercise. In the real world, that is the way it's really going to happen. If there is a radiologic dispersal device (RDD) exploded in some city, for the first few hours the local responders will be the people doing the work. If they use an Incident Command System, the first fire chief on the scene will be the incident commander. Then the mayor may become the incident commander, then the governor, and so on. So, for the first number of hours the local responders will be in charge and making decisions that will affect the local community."

Eric Holdeman, director of King County Office of Emergency Management (Seattle, WA), concurs, "We have been involved in the design aspect of the drill for the past fifteen months and then the conduct of the exercise. When we were activated I was the Incident Manager for the King County Emergency Operations Center. The City of Seattle, the State of Washington and King County were the major players, and we had a few other regional partners participate."

Holdeman feels that the federal government did a better job in preparing for this drill than for the original TOPOFF exercise. "The preparatory series of steps involving seminars and distance learning exercises helped a great deal so it didn't play out cold," he notes. "It was an experience of a lifetime, and I've been doing disaster exercises for thirty-two years. This is the first time the National Command Authorities from cabinet level officers all the way down through the governor, county executives, mayor, firefighters, police, EMS, etc. were on the street responding to simulated events simultaneously."

Jacks adds that there are a number of ongoing evaluations as to the drill's effec-

tiveness—some information will be available to the public and some sensitive information will not. "It was very important for these top officials to participate as if it was a real event and take a close look at their resources," he says.

### Call for Communications

According to John Anthony, deputy director for King County's Information and Telecommunications Services Division (Seattle, WA)—the service provider for King County with voice, data, wired, wireless, radio, communications networks and application development capabilities—the drill was all about testing emergency preparedness. "The exercise helped us test some of our policies and procedures," Anthony says. "It was really an extraordinary exercise; we learned a great deal out of it. For example, you can never be overprepared and overtested for something like this."

Anthony notes that a vital lesson learned is the importance of moving toward an interagency kind of response. "The thought in the past has been if we ever get hit by some kind of attack or natural disaster we would be the primary response group," he explains. "However, the more we got into this the more we discovered how really interconnected we are. It's not just bringing the infrastructure back—it's how you bring it back, how you coordinate with other agencies to help make sure that the county's core business activities and disaster response capabilities are maintained throughout all of this. In the future, we'll be creating a broader network of other county agencies that will work with us to triage the events as they are unfolding and help figure out the most appropriate response mechanism. We really don't have good county-wise priorities for business continuity. We

must establish some and we are working on it. That was one of the huge take-aways—the ability to establish direct personal contact with some of the key people we need to do business with—not only on a regional level but also at a federal level.

"On the small detail level, we need to keep working on internal and external communications," Anthony continues. "We need someone who is a trained communications specialist that is working with everyone to make sure the right messages get out and people can be appropriately informed. Having really good, solid public information tools is really critical to our response."

Technology also played a role in King County's response. According to Holdeman, the drill marks the first time the county used video teleconference capabilities during a disaster, and GIS (computer mapping) also was used extensively. We've used it internally to display different information, but this is the first time we actually tried to send electronic mapping files back and forth," he notes. "It was a new challenge. A piece of paper can easily get lost in the maze of an emergency information center; a data file can get lost just as easily and become more difficult to find. It shows the value and need of GIS as well as developing procedures and protocols to be able to use it effectively and share information cross-jurisdictionally."

King County also exercised the Regional Joint Information Center portion of its Regional Disaster Plan for the first time. "The King County Regional Joint Information Center had 130 different folks working shifts there, and they came from more than forty-seven different agencies," he says. "This proved it could be done, because these are folks who had never worked together before."

In Chicago, 3-1-1 City Services—the city’s nonemergency number that residents can call twenty-four hours per day seven days per week to access all city services and nonemergency police services—also was a key player in the TOPOFF 2 exercise. According to Theodore F. O’Keefe, the agency’s director, 3-1-1 City Services had a number of responsibilities. They contacted participating departments regarding the activation/deactivation of the Office of Emergency Management and Communications’ (OEMC) Joint Operations Center (JOC); served as the link between local hospitals and other health care facilities and the Chicago Department of Public Health; provided notifications of emerging situations to appropriate departments; monitored volume and types of calls to 3-1-1 and prepare regular reports; disseminated information to public regarding neighborhood conditions and citizen actions; were the link among City departments and other public and private agencies like ComEd; trained staff to function in first-provider roles; prepared and distributed special updates and briefings for 3-1-1 staff; and prepared an adjunct call center as a contingency. Telephone, fax, television, CSR, mainframe and PC were the means used to perform these functions, and O’Keefe believes the agency was very effective in meeting the drill’s demands “in concert with many public and private partners.”

### Considering the Future

Holdeman of the King County Office of Emergency Management would like to use EOC (Emergency Operations Center) information management systems in the future. “There are some out there now, but it’s a funding issue,” he notes. Generally the good ones out there are web-based, which allow you to not have to load software on multiple computers. You just need your Internet browser and a password and you are up and running.

“When you have many, many organizations participating simultaneously, it shows the great need for an information system—a common one to build and share data with one another,” Holdeman continues. The county also is close to completing a thirty-million-dollar, state-of-the-art 9-1-1 and EOC. Occupancy of this new Regional Communications and Emergency Co-ordination Center

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(RCECC) is scheduled for August, 2003.

King County E9-1-1’s Anthony recommends other areas take a lesson from the cooperation experienced among the local, state and national agencies during TOPOFF 2 when preparing for any disaster—natural or otherwise. “Particularly in these troubling economic times

when government agencies are being challenged financially, the ability to leverage resources with your close partners in the region really makes a lot of sense. Other agencies should get together and have discussions about what their response capabilities are at the regional level and what they should be in the future. From there, they could get into

## Cyber Drill Prepares Call Center for Possible Attacks

Unfortunately, today’s times not only dictate that emergency response workers practice for any potential real-world calamities; those workers also must consider any attacks that could occur in cyber space. John Anthony—deputy director for King County E9-1-1 Program (Seattle, WA)—had the opportunity to participate in a cyber drill held the week before TOPOFF 2.

“The cyber exercise was pretty amazing,” Anthony says. “One of the outcomes of the first TOPOFF exercise was the recognition of the importance of our communications infrastructure in responding to and recovering from any major incident—whether it is a natural disaster or terrorist activity. These days you have to have your voice and data communications capabilities, e-mail services and web services ready to accommodate the demands they will experience in a major incident. All of these things have become increasingly important in determining how you respond to an incident internally as well as communicating information to the general citizenry and other key stakeholders in a response and recovery exercise.

As a result of the exercise, King County 9-1-1 developed probably a “dozen or more contacts” with some of Washington State’s key management staff, Anthony notes. “We’ve put practices in place so that we are now testing our disaster response capabilities on a regular basis at a regional level, which we’ve never done before,” he notes. “It’s a huge step for us. It represents a new wave of intergovernmental cooperation and it couldn’t come at a better time.”

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some pretty interesting discussions about how to take things to the next level. We (City of Seattle and King County) are really going to be looking into some joint policies and procedures, because in many respects we are joined at the hip, and I suspect that this is the case for a lot of major cities and counties.”

O’Keefe succinctly summarizes the lessons learned to be adequately prepared for any upcoming calamity. “The

three key elements are leadership, communication and coordination.”

*John Anthony of the King County Information and Telecommunications Services Division (Seattle, WA) can be reached at (206) 296 0607; Eric Holdeman of the King County Office of Emergency Management (Seattle, WA) can be reached at (206) 205-8100; and Don Jacks of DHS can be reached at (202) 646-3985.*

## 9-1-1 Callout

# TEAMWORK IS KEY

Last July 4th, a wildfire started in Taos, NM, and had quickly spread to cover more than two thousand acres, generating more than 150 9-1-1 calls to the local call center. The Encebado Fire reportedly was caused by lightning, according to fire officials, and has kept firefighters busy lighting controlled burns around homes and conducting burnouts and thinning trees and other vegetation in an effort to deprive the fire of fuel.

According to Shirley Lujan, the superintendent of central communications for Taos Central Communications—a provider of E9-1-1 services for Taos, Taos County and

Questa—those 150 calls were approximately ten times the amount the center is used to receiving. “We called in extra people to help,” she recalls. “We had five dispatchers here. It could have been a lot worse.” The center also jumped in and helped coordinate relief to the area.

“I believe that teamwork is the key,” Lujan emphasizes. “We had great teamwork here in central communications. Everyone was willing to be here and willing to work, and there were other agencies that helped enormously. Communication between agencies was great.” As of July 17th, the fire was 100 percent contained.